

The Theater of Terror

Raphael Fonseca

2024

There is a word in the title of this exhibition that, in some way, dialogues with Ismael Monticelli's research in a precise manner: "theater." We don't need to be deep connoisseurs of his work to, after seeing some examples of his pieces, associate his practice with a certain theatricality—whether through his interest in installation or his persistent use of materials that, when seen up close, denote a provisional quality. His interest in a visuality that evokes settings and invites the viewer to walk through his environments is becoming increasingly profound.

Far from the Italian stage, the artist invites the audience to observe and walk within temporary theaters—perhaps abandoned?—that more closely resemble the tradition of arena theater. An external gaze watching our bodies move within his works might more quickly associate us with the bodies of actors wandering through his universe; more than spectators, we would be seen as characters in his plots.

Beyond the spatiality of his projects, there is another element that connects his research: his interest in the notion of narrative, invention, and fiction. Even though he often starts from richly documented facts, Monticelli is not at all interested in the potential of certain art productions to document something or to reveal "truths" about thorny topics; I have the impression that for him—playing with the name of the famous documentary festival—"it's all lies." What drives him is the notion of absurdity and the friction between places, images, words, and actions that are discrepant, trans-historical, and often absolutely nonsensical.

The fact is that some events are so absurd that they border on the pages of an unexpected book of fiction. I refer to the occupation and destruction of part of Brazil's historical and artistic heritage, triggered on January 8, 2023, when a group of far-right activists invaded the National Congress, the Planalto Palace, and the Supreme Federal Court. Not only were architectural elements destroyed, but various objects from federal collections were damaged, some even irreversibly. The proliferation of documentary

images of the destruction and firsthand accounts was immense; hundreds of people were arrested, and some judicial verdicts have yet to reach a conclusion.

Upon reviewing these traumatic images, something stands out and can be interpreted as an echo of the attack on the United States Capitol, almost exactly two years earlier: the carnivalization of destruction. There, Jake Angeli drew attention by storming the building with his face painted in the colors of the U.S. flag, wearing a fur hat with horns. In Brasília, people were dressed in Brazilian flag-sarongs and even defecated in different rooms. All of this, in both cases, was broadcasted online, generating live material that showcased different points of view of a collective energy oscillating between celebration and a desire for destruction—not only of the “others” but of everything and anything. Despite the cultural and historical differences between the two countries, it seemed necessary for the protesters to “bring down” these heritages to build a revisionist project of a nation from the void, even if they used icons as old and dear as those from the 19th-century invention of nations.

Like a DJ, what the artist proposes is a collage, a combination, or in musical terms, a mashup of various references. If the crimes committed in Brasília serve as a starting point, it is grounded in Monticelli’s interest in the many histories of art, particularly the ghosts of modernism in contemporary times. Thus, this is an opportunity to cross the federal capital with Futurism, an Italian avant-garde movement that constantly advocated war. Fortunato Depero, a member of the movement, and his 1925 tapestry “War = Party” are among the essential ingredients for this composition.

As we observe the forms gathered here, the chromaticism—so important in Depero's work and, more broadly, in various cultural phenomena in Brazil—stands out. I recall, for instance, the famous modernist carnivals designed by Lasar Segall for the Pró-Arte Moderna Society in São Paulo, created in 1932. Like carnival costumes, the materials here are doomed to ephemerality: made of repurposed cardboard and acrylic paint, these figures emphasize their fragility and the threat of destruction. A flood or fire—catastrophes that have unfortunately haunted several museums in Brazil recently—would quickly destroy these pieces.

Walking through this scene, crossing the mezzanine of the National Museum of Brasília, the audience can see the back of these figures—even though they are life-sized, none of them intends to simulate a human body faithfully. Everything is schematic, flattened, exaggerated, and, of course, staged. Even more ironic is that this work takes

place in a museum not only dedicated to the nation but—like much of Brasília’s architectural heritage—designed by Oscar Niemeyer, the same architect responsible for the buildings that were vandalized. Moreover, the museum’s name refers to Honestino Guimarães, a student and political dissident who disappeared in 1973 due to his participation in resistance movements against Brazil’s military dictatorship.

From protest to protest, from demonstration to demonstration, the masses, whether anonymous or identifiable, constitute Brazil and its long-standing yearning for democratic participation in the public sphere. With more traces of terror than “terror”—a term used to describe the mix of horror and comedy in fiction—Ismael Monticelli seems to bitterly remind us that the stability of democracy in the country is as fragile as the permanence of these cardboard figures: any sudden movement could topple them.

Destroying works of art and/or causing people to disappear is, unfortunately, easy; everything that exists materially is bound to that fate. Making collective memory forget these facts and attempting to control future narratives, however—that is an already impossible task. Like molding clay, the artist manipulates new worlds from the many shards scattered around.

Let us sit in the audience and await his next acts.